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Impact of ‘transition blind spots’ on Access to Higher Education Diploma students with a military background: Why filling gaps in Information, Advice and Guidance matters.

Mel Macer, Bath Spa University

Email: m.macer@bathspa.ac.uk

Abstract This paper contributes to an under-researched area within the field of military-civilian transition. It explores innovatively the experiences of (mainly) ex-service personnel as they journey to and through ‘Access to Higher Education Diplomas’ (AHED), the majority having come from the lower ranks of the Army, to which many enlist with little or no formal qualifications.

Drawing upon empirical research, commissioned in response to anecdotal evidence which suggests a decline in the number of AHED students with a military background, the paper argues that gaps in Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) on AHEDs contribute to what I have termed ‘transition blind spots’ in the trajectories of these Service Leavers (SL). By addressing the issues discussed in this paper, there is potential to mitigate impact from these ‘transition blind spots’ and facilitate the SL transition through the provision of fully-informed IAG on AHEDs. This paper concludes that this new concept might usefully be employed to identify and understand other challenges faced during military-civilian transition.

Key words Access to Higher Education Diploma; Ex-Service Personnel; Military-Civilian Transition; Transition Blind Spots

Introduction

There is relatively little academic literature concerned with the support of military personnel as they transition to civilian employment through adult education and what there is focuses mostly on the USA (Robertson et al., 2014). Although a few of these studies explore the experiences of community college students with a military background (Jones, 2016), most have been conducted at the undergraduate level (Thompson-Ebanks et al., 2017). UK literature tends to focus on the health needs of these individuals.

By developing the concept of ‘transition blind spots’ in the trajectories of Service Leavers (SL), this paper contributes to knowledge and understanding of military-civilian transitions. It argues that transitions may be facilitated by identifying and addressing the transition blind spots that

arise from a lack of fully-informed Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) on AHEDs.

The move from a military career to work within the civilian sector

The USA Government supports its Service Leavers (SLs) to find post-military careers in the civilian sector through the 'Forever GI Bill' (U.S. Dept. of Veteran Affairs, 2017), providing lifelong educational benefits. The UK Government offers similar, though more time-limited benefits to eligible SLs through a 'Resettlement' package - available from two years prior to discharge to five years post discharge (MOD, 2017a). A key objective of this Resettlement support is to help SLs move as seamlessly as possible from military to civilian employment (Connelly, 2016).

In the UK, the level of Resettlement support depends on a SL's length of service and reason for discharge (MOD, 2017a). Personnel who have served for more than 6 years, or have been medically discharged, are eligible to receive careers advice and funding support for qualifications and training. Resettlement includes specific funding support for Level 3 and above qualifications on the Qualifications & Credit Framework, available through two military funds (MOD, 2017a):

1. Enhanced Learning Credits (ELCs). This scheme offers limited financial contributions towards tuition fees. ELCs are available to use during service and up to five years post discharge; and
2. The Publicly-Funded Further Education / Higher Education (PF-FE/HE) Scheme. Unlike ELCs, this funding covers full tuition fees for degrees and is only available for the first 5 years after discharge. Another key feature of PF-FE/HE – and not well promoted – is that it can fund full tuition fees for an AHED and a degree, provided the degree is studied immediately following completion of the AHED.

UK personnel who have served for between 4-6 years receive more limited employment support and those with less than 4 years' service - Early Service Leavers (ESLs) - only have access to a more virtual package of employment support.

Adults with a serving background, either in-service or ex-service, now account for approximately 4% of the UK population (MOD, 2017b), the majority from the Army (FiMT, 2013). Although there is a widely accepted view that many working aged, ex-service personnel make a good transition from their military career to civilian employment (Deloitte, 2016), evidence indicates that for a significant number, both in the UK and the USA, this transition is not smooth. Problems resulting from poor transitions include homelessness (Gamache, et al., 2000; Rosenheck et al., 1994), social isolation, mental health issues (Hatch et al., 2013; Hoge et al., 2002) and a higher risk of entering the criminal justice system (Taylor, 2010).

The cost of unsuccessful transitions in the UK borne by SLs and their families (FiMT, 2013) is estimated in excess of £100 million a year, the largest element being attributed to family breakdown and unemployment (FiMT, 2017).

Education levels within the UK Armed Forces

The UK's Armed Forces offer a range of professional education and training opportunities throughout a military career, mainly to support the service roles of personnel.

Low standards of literacy and numeracy on entry to the military is more problematic for the Army than the Navy, or the RAF, because the Army has no minimum standard for entry - except for some technical posts - and recruits many young people from poor socio-economic backgrounds, with low levels of educational attainment (Ashcroft, 2014; BIS, 2012a). Nearly 50% of Army recruits have literacy and numeracy skills equivalent to that of 11-year olds (FiMT, 2013) and 40% of working-aged ex-Army personnel are reported to have had at least six adverse childhood experiences (RBL, 2014). Many choose to join the Army at a young age because they want to get away from challenging backgrounds (SSAFA, 2016).

The minimum level of qualifications required for promotion in the Army's non-commissioned ranks is currently set at Level two Functional Skills, equivalent to the literacy and numeracy skills of Key Stage 2 primary school pupils. This is out of kilter with current Government targets for under 18s, who are required to re-sit GCSEs in English and Maths until they secure a grade C or above (ESFA, 2017). Functional skills qualifications, one of the

lowest educational qualifications offered in the UK, were described as inadequate in the Wolf Review of Education (Wolf, 2011). Consequently, many young Army recruits are at risk of leaving the military without GCSEs in English and Maths – a likely barrier to employment in many civilian careers.

Ex-service personnel are significantly less likely to have a degree or equivalent than their civilian counterparts (MOD, 2017b). However, there is a lack of clarity regarding the employment status of working age UK ex-service personnel compared to civilians. One report (MOD, 2017b) suggests there to be no significant difference, but another study (Royal British Legion, 2014) found that working-aged ex-service personnel were twice as likely to be unemployed (11% v. 6%).

These are important considerations, given that about 900,000 ex-service personnel are of working age (Deloitte, 2016), many seeking fulfilling civilian careers that require a degree, e.g. engineering, nursing, human resources.

Service Leavers at risk of unemployment or under-employment

The disadvantages facing low rank Army SL entering the civilian workforce without English and Maths GCSEs may be compounded, because they appear to have less time off to engage with Resettlement support than those from higher ranks (Ashcroft, 2015). Young Army recruits and ESLs are at greatest risk of post-service deprivation (Murphy et al., 2017, FiMT, 2013) from an intersection of disadvantages (Choo & Feree, 2010) including low socio-economic status, poor educational attainment (Fossey, 2013) and/or mental health problems (Macmanus et al., 2012). These pre-service vulnerabilities can impact negatively on military-civilian transitions (Centre for Social Justice, 2014).

The UK military is the only European country to recruit young people under the age of 17 years and one of only a few to recruit under the age of 18 - 22% of Army recruits in 2015-16 were under 18 (Medact, 2016). Evidence suggests that these junior entrants are less likely than adult recruits to be promoted through the ranks, with 0.2% of under 18s rising to Lance Corporal, compared with 5% of over 18s (MOD, 2013). These young

recruits can face challenges when competing for jobs with civilian peers who have secured facilitating civilian qualifications.

Is it evident that particular cohorts of ex-service personnel, including young recruits and ESLs and those leaving service with no or few civilian recognised qualifications, are likely to find their transition back into the civilian world of work challenging and may find themselves at risk of being unemployed, or under-employed, within the civilian sector. Studies have shown that ESLs from the Army's lower ranks are more likely to have problematic military-civilian transitions and less likely to be in education, training or employment when compared to the average SL (Ashcroft, 2014; RBL, 2014). ESLs, however, are not eligible for military funding to support their personal education or training.

Access to Higher Education Diplomas (AHED)

The AHED is a level 3 qualification that offers a non-traditional route into HE in England and Wales for those aged 19 years and over who, for various reasons, including having joined the Armed Forces at 16, do not have the necessary A-levels to study for a degree.

Usually studied as a full-time one-year course at a local Further Education (FE) college, the AHED equips students with both study skills and subject knowledge. Approximately 70% of between 35-45,000 AHED students a year progress to HE (Farmer, 2017). In 2016-17, the top five degrees studied by AHED students were: Subjects Allied to Medicine (including Nursing), Biological Sciences, Social Work, Social Studies and Business & Administration studies (QAA, 2018).

Traditionally, AHEDs provided a non-traditional route to HE for those without GCSEs and/or A-levels. However, since the introduction of the new AHED specification in 2013 (QAA, 2013) - when the GCSE equivalence was removed from the AHED - an increasing number of universities now require GCSEs (English, maths and/or science) alongside an AHED. This creates an additional hurdle for those ex-service personnel considering an AHED, who do not have these GCSEs. To address this issue the FE sector offers pre-AHED courses, enabling prospective AHED students to secure required GCSEs prior to their AHED course.

Although studies on UK AHED students are few, the literature describes the AHED student experience as a valuable transition (James et al., 2013), building competence and confidence for mature students to journey on into Higher Education (Bushner, 2015).

In 2016/17, 22% of AHED students who went on to study a degree came from neighbourhoods with low participation in HE, compared to 10% of non-AHED students (QAA, 2018). Additionally, 87% of accepted HE applicants with an AHED were aged over 21, compared to 34% with other qualifications (QAA, 2018). This indicates an important role for AHEDs, not only in widening participation in HE for disadvantaged groups but also in supporting career changes for mature students. Nearly 80% of AHED students are accepted by universities within their local area and university drop-out rates are lower for mature AHED students (10.3%), compared with non-AHED students (11.6%) (QAA, 2018).

In 2016, the Government-funded 24+ Advanced Learner Loan (ALL) was extended to those aged 19 and over. Uniquely among FE courses, the ALL can be used to fund AHED course fees that are written off on completion of an HE course (ESFA, 2017) - in effect providing a fee-free AHED. This 19+ ALL now offers 19+ ESLs the opportunity to study a degree through the AHED route, without the cost of AHED fees.

A growing body of anecdotal evidence from AHED course providers in the South West region of England (Allison, 2014) suggested a decline in the number of AHED students with a service background. Informed by this finding, the Forces in Mind Trust¹ commissioned research to gain an understanding of the experiences of AHED students with a service background (Macer, 2016). That study, framed by the concept of a student journey to and through an AHED, offered insights not only into some of the challenges that this cohort of students faced on their AHED trajectory, but illuminated how AHED courses had contributed to positive military-civilian transitions.

This paper, drawing on empirical findings from the Macer study (2016), argues that gaps in IAG on AHEDs contribute to transition blind spots that can impact negatively on these students' AHED trajectories, risking unsuccessful military-civilian transitions.

Methodology

The study was framed by the concept of an AHED student's journey (Figure 1)

Place Figure 1 here

(Figure 1: AHED Student Journey)

Sample

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- 24 past, current and potential AHED students with a background of service in the Army, Navy and RAF. 88% were from the non-commissioned ranks and 67% at rank of Lance Corporal equivalent or below. Participants were recruited through publicity in (ex)military community resources and through regional Access Co-ordinator Networks. All recruits that met the inclusion criteria were interviewed.

(Table 1: Profile of student interviewees)

- 3 AHED Co-ordinators, each from a recruitment area for Army, RAF and Navy; and
- 30 military-facing professionals (whose service users have a military background) and civilian-facing professionals (civilian service users) whose roles included, either wholly or partly, an element of Career Information, Advice and/or Guidance

Semi-structured interview prompts

With civilian and military professionals:

- Career IAG;

- AHED-related IAG;
- Links with FEIs and/or HEIs;
- Military – civilian professional links;
- Resettlement support; and
- AHED students with a service background.

With past, current and potential AHED students:

- Access to career IAG;
- Resettlement support;
- Introduction to AHED;
- AHED-related IAG;
- Support for AHED journey; and
- Challenge to AHED journey.

Analysis

Manual, thematic analysis (Glaser, 1965) was conducted on full interview transcripts. The analysis was organised around the research's two primary concerns relating to the AHED student journey: i) Knowledge of AHED; and ii) Engagement with AHED.

Preliminary analysis from a sample of transcripts identified the following sets of categories for each such theme, providing a working analytical framework that was then applied to all full interview transcripts:

Theme 1: Knowledge of AHED, with three categories: i) Access to Adult Career IAG; ii) Promotion of AHED; and iii) Provision of AHED-related IAG;

Theme 2: Engagement with AHED, with five categories: i) Opportunities for personal education during service; ii) Funding AHED and degree fees; iii) Currency of military qualifications; iv) GCSE requirements for HE; and v) Military-civilian transition experience.

Out of scope of this study

Two areas were out of scope: particular issues that affected Reservist personnel, or adults with a Commonwealth background, were not considered, nor was it intended to illuminate any specific issues that affected those who left service before the introduction, in 2005, of the

Resettlement offer provided through the MOD's contract with the Career Transition Partnership.

Findings and discussion

Using empirical evidence, this study introduces the concept of transition blind spots to describe how gaps in provision of fully-informed IAG to SLs arise from a lack of wider knowledge - amongst both military and civilian career professionals - about the full range of military and civilian career development opportunities available to SLs.

Balin et al. discuss similar career development issues for international students, describing the importance of "...comprehensive and culturally competent services..." (2016, p.1) that require institutional efforts to fully support these students' career development needs. It can be argued that removing transition blind spots for SLs to ensure they receive fully informed IAG on AHEDs, requires such 'culturally competent' practices from both military and civilian career professionals, to avoid any negative impact on a SL's AHED trajectory.

Similar to findings from USA studies on veteran isolation (Brown et al., 2016) and military student experiences of community college (Jones, 2016), this study found that some ex-service personnel, notably those from the lower ranks of the Army, felt that joining an AHED course had supported their transition from their military to civilian life. Specifically, this occurred by helping them to demilitarise within the structured, civilian environment of FE alongside other mature, career changers. However, as discussed below, study participants also encountered what is referred to as transition blind spots on their AHED journey.

Analysis of the interview data identified five key themes that represented the experiences of the study participants on their journey to and through their AHED: i) Opportunities for personal study during service; ii) Facilitating qualifications at the point of discharge from service; iii) Access to aspirational Career IAG during Resettlement; iv) Funding AHED and degree course tuition fees; and v) Feelings about the military-civilian transition as an AHED student.

Opportunities for personal study during service

As reported in other studies (Connelly, 2016 and Vorhaus et al., 2012), the interviewees in this study described a lack of time for personal study while serving due, in their opinion, to the combined impact of an increased workload and a decreased workforce. They suggested that this has had a particularly negative impact on those in the lower ranks, particularly from the Army.

“I wanted to do an Access course in service... but the strain on manning in the Army and the pressures of operations meant that would have been pretty hard to do.” (Ex-Army/1)

“Personal education is limited... to Officers, this only became apparent when I became an Officer...” (Ex-Army/2)

Facilitating qualifications at the point of discharge from service

The findings provide insights into two particular issues relating to SLs' qualifications at the point of discharge, both having potential to impact negatively on a SL who wants to take a non-traditional route to HE. First, the currency of military qualifications for university and secondly, the importance of the facilitating role of GCSEs in English and Maths.

Professionals from the military and civilian sectors described cases where SLs had found, to their frustration, that the AHED route was the only non-traditional route to HE available to them. They suggested that this was because the universities had not recognised their military qualifications as eligible currency for 'Accreditation of Prior Learning' (QAA, 2004). This concern was also voiced by some of the ex-service interviewees. Similar problems, where HE institutions have failed to acknowledge the subject and skills content within military qualifications, have also been reported in USA studies (DiRamio, 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009).

“...we were always led to believe that the qualifications that we gained in the Army would just translate straight to civilian when we left, it was only after I left that I realised that it wasn't true... That was a shock”. (Ex-Army/3)

“...if somebody has high levels of professional military qualifications, I think they are entitled to have them... measured against either HE entry

qualifications or qualifications at degree level. The universities need educating about the skills and subject content of military qualifications...” (HE Careers)

Many ex-service personnel described what they considered to be a lack of fully informed IAG while in service, regarding the lack of currency within the civilian world of Functional Skills in Literacy and Numeracy. This is a particularly important issue, given the increasing demand from universities for GCSEs in English, maths and science, together with an AHED following the removal of the GCSE equivalence from AHEDs in 2016 (QAA, 2016).

Both military-facing and civilian-facing career IAG professionals described their difficulty in keeping up-to-date with GCSE requirements by universities for AHED students.

“...the currency of your GCSEs, it’s at the discretion of the HEI provider and it just keeps changing. It’s really difficult to keep abreast”. (Help 4 Heroes Careers)

This research also found that some interviewees had left the Army under the mistaken belief that their Level 2 Functional Skills equated to Level 2 GCSE passes. As one Army professional said:

“...we have a slight problem in the Army, or we have had, in that we do Functional Skills in literacy and sell it to soldiers as – ‘Oh, this equates to a GCSE in English and Maths’... but it doesn’t...” (Army Resettlement)

It appeared that several interviewees had not received fully informed AHED-related IAG regarding the new requirement for GCSEs. Over a third of the ex-service personnel interviewed had to secure their English and/or Maths GCSEs for entry to HE with an AHED course; of these 88% were from the Army. Many had to choose to either delay the start of their AHED course whilst securing their GCSEs, or had to cope with the additional stress of undertaking GCSE study alongside their AHED course.

“I’d say about 50% dropped out because they were doing GCSEs and their Access course at the same time... it’s really tough...” (Access Coordinator)

Many ex-Army personnel commented that, had they been made aware of the AHED route prior to leaving service and of the increasing demand by universities for English and Maths GCSEs alongside an AHED, they may

have been motivated to use the opportunity provided by the MOD to gain these GCSEs during service.

“The Army should ensure soldiers focus on getting their GCSEs in English and Maths... it’s actually a Government target... I would have done them in service and wouldn’t be in the predicament of having to do my Maths GCSEs now.” (Ex-Army/1)

“...knowing what I now know, I’d probably have made more of an effort at the time to get the GCSEs in the Army.” (Ex-Army/2)

Access to aspirational Career Information, Advice and Guidance during Resettlement

The findings from this research suggest that the career IAG available to some SLs through the Resettlement process, particularly to those in the lower ranks, was lacking in aspiration.

“...the whole Resettlement thing was focussed on... you getting a job... they didn’t talk about college or university. It had nothing to do with trying to further yourself... and I was like... but I actually want to do something more fulfilling...” (Ex-Marine/1)

Access to satisfying and meaningful civilian employment is considered to be an essential component of a good military-civilian transition (FiMT, 2014) and therefore a lack of aspirational career IAG for SLs risks failing those who are most vulnerable during transition (Ashcroft, 2013), particularly those who do not have facilitating qualifications for civilian employment.

Insights gained from this study’s findings suggest that better promotion of AHED to SLs during the Resettlement stage, combined with improved access to fully-informed IAG on AHEDs, could support the provision of more aspirational career guidance to SLs, particularly for those leaving service without any formal qualifications, who have the desire and ability to achieve more.

“... (Resettlement) workshops contained literally nothing on university or Access...” (Ex-Army/4)

“The pool that the infantry sort of dip into are lads from Council Estates that haven’t done particularly well at school... when they hear ‘university’

they sort of assume that you're not talking about them. ...I'd have never thought someone like me would go to college or university... not with my background." (Ex-Army/5).

According to Watts and Sultana (2004), the provision of quality, impartial careers IAG is key to: (i) improving the efficiency of education and training; (ii) meeting supply and demand; and (iii) to promoting social inclusion. However, with UK Government policy on adult careers guidance limiting access to face-to-face support, predominantly to unemployed adults, many adults find they are unable to benefit from career guidance (Gibbons and Foster, 2014).

The field of career IAG developed in the early twentieth century, from a concern for social justice and the need for social reform, to address a range of inequalities and challenges facing those in transition from rural to urban employment (Hooley & Sultana, 2016). It could be argued that similar challenges face some undergoing military-civilian transitions, particularly those leaving the lower ranks of the Army. For them, access to fully informed career IAG – from a military and civilian perspective - could help their transition by supporting their development of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2001) and facilitating social mobility (horizontal and vertical), to provide "... a way to enhance the opportunity structure..." (Faist, 2013, p.1644) for moving successfully from military to civilian employment. These findings highlight the opportunity afforded by the Resettlement process to offer aspirational discussions about post-military careers, through raising awareness about both AHEDs and the PF-FE/HE Scheme. This could offer those leaving service without A-levels the chance to fulfil aspirations for a post military career that requires a degree, without incurring costs from course tuition fees.

"...they need to make it clear that you can have the option of doing a free degree, even when you don't have A levels... and be sure that you understand the offer of this FE/HE scheme." (Ex-Army/2)

"The Education Centre had loads of advertisements about the free degree thing but... I'd never seen anything about the Access course. ...there are probably a lot of people out there thinking that they haven't got the qualifications to do a degree, so discard the free degree offer, you know, straight away..." (Ex-RAF/1)

Funding AHED and degree tuition fees

This study found that those ex-service personnel who had used ELCs to part-fund their AHED course fees had not been aware that they could have applied to use either the ALL or the PF-FE/HE Scheme to cover the full cost of their AHED course fees. Promotion of the PF-FE/HE Scheme appeared, amongst interviewees, to have been limited to one RAF SL. This supports findings reported by the Forces in Mind Trust (2017) that found that this scheme is not always clearly explained.

“There are some really good offers out there... like the PF FE/HE Scheme... but very few people know about them...” (Army Welfare)

The vast majority of the career-related professionals interviewed for this research were not aware that the PF FE/HE Scheme could be used to cover the full tuition costs of both an AHED course and an HE course.

“...the FE/HE scheme is not really fully understood or communicated.” (Ex-Army/1)

“One of the guys on my H4H course with me, said... you know you can apply for your first degree for free because you’ve been medically discharged. No-one had ever said that to me...” (Ex-Marine/1)

The PF-FE/HE scheme, like its USA equivalent (U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, 2017), is only available to ex-service personnel. As such, it could be argued that the promotion of this scheme during Resettlement does not help the military in its aim to be retention positive (MOD, 2010). Evidence indicates that the provision of quality, impartial career guidance is key to supporting transitions into education, training and employment (Hughes et al., 2016). Therefore, any such conflict of interest potentially risks impacting negatively on the quality of the careers IAG received by some SLs from Resettlement providers – including those leaving service with few or no civilian recognised qualifications who may benefit from an AHED.

Specific reference was made, by several Resettlement career guidance professionals, to the problem that many of their under 24 year old ESL clients had faced in finding that they were not eligible to use what was then the 24+ ALL to fund a fee-free AHED course, nor had they any access to specific military funding support for adult education.

“The 24+ loan is great but I’ve got a 22-year-old who wants to be a paramedic and do an Access course but he can’t access (this) funding until he’s 24...” (Career Transition Partnership/1)

“It’s difficult for them to get onto Access courses and get funding... for our guys between 19 and 24... The Access course would be perfect for many ESLs... if the funding was available to them.” (Career Transition Partnership/2)

During the latter stages of this research the minimum age for eligibility for the ALL was lowered from 24 years to 19 years. This offers the potential to widen the AHED market to younger SLs aged 19-23 years, who are predominantly ESLs from the Army.

Feelings about the military-civilian transition as an AHED student

Supporting recent findings in the literature (Binks and Cambridge, 2018), many of the ex-service interviewees in this study described having challenging experiences when they re-entered the civilian world.

“I was living out of the back of a van; I used to sleep there and washed in McDonalds... I was struggling to adapt to the civilian world and ended up losing my job”. (Ex-Army/6)

Most talked about having become institutionalised by their military career.

“You’re so in your little bubble in the military... when you come out, you haven’t got a clue about anything... it took me five years to really get used to being a civilian. No structure... being on my [own] didn’t help at all... once you’re bored, you’ve had it.” (Ex-Navy/1)

“I’d been institutionalised really from the age of 16 and I was absolutely hopeless. ...I ended up breaking up from my wife... I’ve had terrible financial bad troubles since I left the Army...” (Ex-Army/7)

Many ex-service interviewees described feelings of loss, loneliness and isolation after having left military service, echoing findings by Herman and Yarwood (2014).

“...once you’re discharged, it severs all the ties... You do feel alone because you’ve gone from this massive network... they do everything for you too... it’s just not that simple when you go into the civilian thing.” (Ex-Army/5)

However, all ex-service interviewees talked very positively about their experience as an AHED student and how being at college with mature, civilian peers had helped them to 'de-militarise'.

"...the Access course for me was a case of deprogramming the Army and reprogramming the civvy..." (Ex-Army/4)

"...I think a lot more needs to be done for the militarising in your head. ...without mass civilian exposure, it's really hard to get the military out of your head." (Ex-Army/6)

Several interviewees described how the AHED course had offered them a valuable space to acclimatise to the cultural and personal adjustments to life as a civilian. They particularly liked the structure that the AHED course and college environment offered them.

"I was lucky; my Access course took me seamlessly from my military life back into the civilian world. ... being in a structured environment with civilians is definitely important coz a big part of military life is structure..." (Ex-Army/8)

"...my Access course gave me a focus, rather than coming out and then looking up to the sky and going 'what do I do now?'" (Ex-Army/7)

"... I'd rather not do a distance course because I like the idea of going somewhere, of interfacing with civilians... of having that discipline and structure." (Army Service Leaver/1)

Ex-service students, like civilian AHED students, represent a unique group of non-traditional students, often being older with family commitments and less involved in the wider student community (Olsen et al., 2014). The limited literature on ex-service student experiences suggests that the mental health and social support needs of this cohort of mature students is not well understood (Jones, 2016). Those studies that do exist indicate that these students face unique challenges in adjusting from a military career to student life (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rudd et al., 2011; Bonar and Domenici, 2011).

Of particular interest from this study was the finding that the majority of the ex-service interviewees had welcomed the opportunity to be part of a

civilian peer group with other mature students who were also in transition, several acknowledging that many civilian AHED students are also 'career changers'. Although an under-researched area, work by Busher et.al. (2014, 2015) and James et al. (2013, 2015, 2016) describe the transformative experience of being an AHED student.

"All Access students are transitioning in one way or another... Access opens doors; it has for me... it's a stepping stone... I think it's great and should be pushed more in the military." (Ex-Marine/1)

Interviewees who had been medically-discharged also described how their AHED course experience had helped them to rebuild their confidence.

"I'm a complex case because of my PTSD, because of my hearing, because of my dyslexia... But going to college really helped me..." (Ex-Army/4)

Several talked, in detail, about how their experience as an AHED student had helped them to cope with mental health challenges they had faced after leaving the military. Some described how the structure of the AHED course had offered them a constructive distraction at a time of mental challenge.

"I was convalescing at home and I wanted to fill the time in a productive manner, so I requested to go to college to do my Access course. ... it was a good distraction tool. ...you also build relationships and realise that you're not the only one with problems, so you start to look at life a bit differently." (Ex-Army/5)

Most of the ex-service personnel had only become aware of the existence of AHEDs after they had left the military.

"...(SLs) just don't know that Access courses exist." (Navy Resettlement)

"It's amazing how many people just don't know about them. It's crazy." (Ex-Navy/2)

"If I'd known about it while in the Army, I would have looked at trying to do something about it while in service..." (Ex-Army/9)

The majority found out via word-of-mouth from family or friends. Professionals from the AHED sector confirmed that:

"Word-of-mouth seems to be our strongest tool..." (Access Coordinator/2)

Those who had experienced a lengthy period between being leaving the military and starting their AHED course talked with passion about the lost benefit the opportunity to start their AHED course soon after their discharge could have afforded them.

“...I’d say if you’re looking at doing an Access course, get on it as quickly as you possible can because it will keep you motivated, keep you going. If I’d done this course straight from the Navy, I wouldn’t have struggled so much adapting to be a civilian...(Ex-Navy/1)

“...by doing the Access course... I had structure to my life. And I think that was important... I didn’t want to just leave because I know a lot of people struggle...” Ex-(RAF/2)

Studies from the USA describe how local colleges, geared for the non-traditional learner, are well suited to the adult learning needs of students with a service background and have been described by Jones as “...the vanguard of student-veteran transition.” (2016, p.3).

Notably, the insights from this study suggest that the AHED experience could be promoted to SLs as a qualification that not only offers a non-traditional route to HE but an experience that, of itself, could contribute to a smoother transition from a military to civilian life.

“...because my plans to get on the rigs failed, I hit a new low... then I started thinking ...about a career that I would like... this Access is a real good thing for me... They almost need to make the Access course for that sort of thing, for helping us in transition.” (Ex-Marine/2)

Conclusion

This study concludes that AHED students in transition from a military to civilian life benefitted from studying within an FE environment. Studying alongside mature, civilian peers – many of whom were also career changers - appeared to have supported them in their re-adjustment to the civilian world.

However, a lack of fully informed, aspirational career IAG to SLs during Resettlement, as evidenced in this study, risks producing transition blind spots with potential to impact negatively on the transition experience of some SLs, most notably those leaving the lower ranks of the Army without A-levels who are interested in a fulfilling, post-military career that requires a degree.

The insights gained from this research suggest that raising awareness about the existence of AHEDs and providing access to fully informed IAG on AHEDs during the Resettlement period could facilitate more aspirational career guidance discussions with SLs. It could offer those without A-levels both hope and practical steps towards fulfilling post-military careers that require a degree and in doing so facilitate more successful transitions for both SLs and their families.

Although the military could do much to mitigate the impact of these transition blind spots by increasing awareness about AHEDs to its personnel, particularly during Resettlement, civilian stakeholders - notably AHED providers and the HE sector - also have an important role to play. The civilian sector could improve its general promotion of AHEDs and ensure that there is a clearer understanding about the opportunities available to eligible SLs through the PF-FE/HE Scheme, for studying both an AHED and a degree, free from tuition fees.

Returning to the title of this paper, identifying and understanding the causes of transition blind spots does matter for AHED students with a serving background. Doing so could offer some SLs the double benefit of: i) providing hope, opportunity and financial support towards a fulfilling post-military career that requires a degree; and ii) facilitating a smoother transition through engagement with the structured, civilianising environment of FE.

Further research within the field of military-civilian transition might usefully employ intersectionality theory (Choo and Ferree, 2010) to help us improve our understanding of how institutions, cultures, hierarchical relationships, socio-economic backgrounds and interpersonal interactions interact and overlap to impact on the SL transition experience. Such research could help to explain how transition blind spots arise from

multiple sources of potential discrimination and disadvantage for SLs, ex-service personnel and their family members.

The concept of transition blind spots could be useful for exploring and understanding the experiences of other student cohorts in transition, such as civilian career changers and first year undergraduates with widening participation characteristics.

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Notes

1. The Forces in Mind Trust is a charity - funded by the Big Lottery – that works to improve the civilian lives of ex-Service personnel and their families. More information at www.fim-trust.org

Table 1: Profile of student interviewees

	Past AHED student	Current AHED student	Potential AHED student
Army	5	6	3
Navy/Marine	1	5	0
RAF	0	3	1

Figure 1

